

DISTANT PROXIMITY: MAPPING PRESENCE AND ABSENCE

Tudor Mitroi, M.A.

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APPROVED:

Vincent Falsetta, Major Professor

Vernon Fisher, Committee Member

Annette Lawrence, Committee Member

Don Schol, Committee Member and Associate

Dean of the School of Visual Arts

D. Jack Davis, Dean of the School of Visual Arts

C. Neal Tate, Dean of the Robert B. Toulouse

School of Graduate Studies

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Chapter I presents my background as an artist born and raised in Romania, and describes my artwork in connection with my interests and experiences. Maps and traditional Romanian art are important sources of influence. The questions in the statement of problem deal with the way ideas, references to various elements, and installation impact the artwork.

Chapter II discusses the installation at the Dallas Visual Art Center, the creative process, and how the artwork addressed the questions in the statement of problem. Important points are: a step into three-dimensionality with the tall, freestanding pieces painted on both sides, the use of topographical contours in creating shapes, issues of form and content as expressed in the painted surfaces, and the interaction of the individual works in the installation.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

After the plain-clothes secret police officer went page by page through my sketchbook wanting to know what and where everything was, he asked me whether I could make a map of the local seacoast using my drawings. Big Brother, turned out, didn't see any art there. His Soviet-style paranoid thinking had already diagnosed subversion and possibly espionage. "Why don't you draw some nice looking girls", the officer suggested (too late). My drawings instead described the landscape carefully with crisp lines. I was being too accurate and specific in the wrong place at the wrong time (or at least for the wrong audience).

Years later and thousands of miles away, I am looking at a topographical map of the same area. Made around the turn of the twentieth century, the map still has place names left from the time of the Ottoman rule. Every little detail is there, even the small mounds (I wonder what the lieutenant would say). With its elegant hand lettering and various linear patterns, the map doesn't just describe a place. Inevitably, it carries far more than what the cartographer intended. Besides history and memories, the map has its own story of how it changed hands until it got to me: Romanian Army, Wehrmacht, US Army, CIA, Library of Congress, UNT Library.

When I came to the United States from Romania a few years ago, I was bringing with me a lot of baggage. Part of it was a traditional Western European training. On the

other hand I had long been interested in Romania's cultural heritage still alive in archaic and post-Byzantine forms. Growing up I experienced both the city and old rural areas which preserved not only some of their natural beauty, but also old architecture, churches with frescoes and icons, roadside and funeral markers and shrines. Based on the traditional imagery of the religious icons, the markers were hybrid structures. Their shape was as intrinsic to their meaning as their lively painted decoration and text. So was their outdoor location, where the markers stood long after their paintings had been washed off. Unintendedly, markers were quite subversive in a way. They had survived both the triumph of Western civilization and the absolute control of the communist state. Not unlike icons and markers, maps fascinated me since early on. While accuracy is their primary quality, their unintended meanings (language, history, politics, identity, memory, etc) far transcend their intended use.

In the past few years, the challenges of a new environment have helped me push my art and define better what I am looking for. I wanted to bring together disparate fragments of time and place that would point both at their past and distant origins and their present situation in the work. I see my works as characters carrying narratives and meanings, not unlike the roadside or water well markers back in Romania. Their shape, unlike the traditional Western rectangle, enhances their status as objects. I started by using jigsaw puzzle shapes whose connotations are easily understood in contemporary culture. I cut them out of three-quarter-inch plywood to fit in pairs. The overall size of the pieces rarely exceeded three feet. I wanted to use maps since they are on one hand crisp and matter-of-fact representations, on the other open ended narratives. The map

background was painted flat in casein and the map was painted or drawn in sharp pencil on top. Although the shapes were meant to fit, I wanted the pieces to be angled or at least one of them to be tilted off the wall as a means to disrupt the order. The contents and colors of the puzzle pieces were not meant to be part of a continuous structure. Geometric grids of the Los Angeles area where I lived when I first came to the United States were paired or overlapped with organic patterns of Romanian maps. Later I started using black-and-white images of landscapes in Romania enlarged from my old medium format contact sheets. These images acted like openings or windows in the map narrative and physically tended to have a light sheen as they were painted in oils or acrylics. I also started using ambiguously elongated shapes. The anthropomorphic quality of the jigsaw puzzle shapes, as well as the elongated forms of later, echoed, however distantly, the various shapes of the markers and their side covers. More recent pieces hugged or were hugged by wall corners. Present as objects, these new works were as much about continuity as about break. Being placed in or on corners, they also pointed at their odd location. I also experimented with installing them out-of-doors on posts as if they were road signs. On their surface, maps and images mixed and condensed memories and confusing meanings of time, space, and place.

Statement of Problem

While my previous body of work was an important step not only in pushing my art but also in helping me define the issues that I am interested in, I felt that its relative formal consistency has become somewhat predictable, at the same time preventing my ideas to develop. I felt that form and content were equally important and could not be

separated, so a change in one would affect the other. On the other hand, I liked the idea of each work dealing with its specific idea(s) yet being part of a consistent body of work. At that point, I could not predict how my work would evolve. The questions that I wanted to address were therefore rather open-ended:

1. How can I push my work by exploring ideas in depth, and how will this translate in a change in format and/or media?
2. How can I make the work more present not only formally, but also through its references to both distant and immediate or everyday life elements?
3. How can the installation of the work contribute to its impact and reading?

Methodology

I installed an exhibition of works dealing with the issues discussed above. The progress of the work was documented in a journal. The paper will discuss the works specifically as well as the exhibition.

CHAPTER II

DESCRIPTION, ANALYSIS, AND EVALUATION

The opportunity to explore and develop my ideas presented itself when I was offered a one-person show at the Dallas Visual Art Center (DVAC), now Dallas Center for Contemporary Art, as part of *Mosaics*, a program featuring artists whose ethnicity is an essential element of their work. Though I disliked the “ethnic artist” concept, it was certain that some of my important influences and concerns as an artist had their origins in my Romanian experience and the way it determined my perception of the United States.

The first problem arose when I was confronted with the space where I was going to have the exhibition. At one end on its narrow side, which was about twenty-four feet wide, the space was completely open toward the rest of the building’s interior. Divided on the long side from the rest of the gallery by a compact wall about forty-eight feet long, it had two large windows reaching the ceiling on the opposite side, and an exit with glass doors built into a similar window at the end of the room. The portion of wall between the windows did not allow for an effective display. Practically, only the long wall was suitable for installing my painted objects. I attempted to visualize my work there and felt that it would be overwhelmed by the large open space, which would look oppressive and minimize the small size of the works. There were some mobile partitions available, which could have been used to divide the space into more visually manageable sections, but that by itself would not have enhanced the impact of the art works nor their interaction with

the space. I realized the need to create an organic relationship between the artwork and the space in which it would be displayed. On the other hand, the projected show definitely needed some larger scale works. Small pieces alone, however suitable they had been for expressing my ideas, would not have made a powerful enough statement. I took a series of photographs of the space, including some of the partitions, experimenting with their placement and size. Eventually, I decided to combine several types of painted objects into an installation where they would work both as individual pieces and interacting within the space as a group. The installation was going to relate directly to the third question in my statement of problem, and indirectly to the first question.

Most of my previous work, however irregular in shape, had a horizontal dominant, possibly reinforced by the use of maps as visual narratives. In the case of the projected installation at DVAC, the need for larger scale pieces related to an equally important need for freestanding verticals, which would serve as a sort of anchors in the otherwise fluid space. An additional stimulus for the inclusion of such pieces was the relatively high ceiling, with a clearance of at least twelve feet. I wanted the new pieces to have the same quality as objects as my previous work, so I opted for wood boards. I decided to use thin, long boards of poplar, about three-quarter-inch thick and one foot wide, and between seven and twelve feet in length. Their format was perfectly suitable for my intention of creating large, elongated, freestanding pieces. The quality of the wood allowed a clean cut and smooth edges. In addition, there were a couple more details that added to the appeal of wood as opposed to plywood: the idea that the wood fiber, fine and smooth, was compact and ran lengthwise, and the lighter weight of wood. I decided to

include three freestanding pieces, which seemed to be the minimum number that would work effectively in that space.

It is important to mention that I made conceptual decisions along with those related to formal aspects, such as the ones mentioned above. Since writing about the creative process is a different process itself, which cannot duplicate the thinking involved in making the artwork, what may appear to be a series of steps is in fact a complex decision process where formal and conceptual concerns cannot be separated.

In the case of the larger, elongated pieces, I wanted to create shapes that would be based on contours from maps, or maybe give the contours a physical dimension by turning them into much larger objects. Tracing shapes following topographical elements provided for an experience to some extent similar, though much less direct, to painting maps on a surface, as I had already done in my previous work. It is an act of appropriation, though not as much in its current postmodern sense as strategy of art making, but rather of creating a personal experience of or out of something otherwise taken for granted, or seen as common property. Topographical elements included in my work have always related to personal experiences. The conflict between my personal involvement with things perceived as impersonal was at the origin of the story in the introduction. What the lieutenant did not seem to understand was at least that personal, emotional involvement does not have to result in sentimental or romantic depictions (nor do sharpness and accuracy mean espionage for that matter). The contours that worried the authorities meant something different to me. I wanted in a way to retrace them, and extend the same approach to the western end of the story, on the coast of Santa Monica

Bay. I decided to start with a wall piece, using portions of similar length from both coasts, which I perceived as two extremes. Geographically, the coast next to the current southern border of Romania, once site of my vacations at sea, and the coast west of Los Angeles, on which I lived when I first came to the United States, were the eastern and western ends of my personal experience.

Coast Lines was the first piece where I experimented with map contours in tracing its shape. It was still a wall piece, cut out from a seven-foot board (in fact, in cutting all the large size pieces based on map contours, the length of the boards was left intact). Instead of using a body of land as a basis for its shape, *Coast Lines* enclosed two bodies of water shaped by their corresponding coasts. This resulted in an elongated shape, like a distorted, bent, undulating blade. The shape of the Romanian coast was based on the old map I mentioned in the introduction, detailing exactly the portion where the art vs. government story occurred. A series of piers and a channel entrance on the Santa Monica Bay coast resulted in cuts into the body of water, enhancing the impression of the negative space (in this case the body of land) shaping the positive space of the bodies of water. As in the case of following the contours of the coast, in choosing the colors for the two bodies of water I tried to follow a similar approach, which could be considered literal, so I decided to paint the Romanian Black Sea in pure black. For the Santa Monica Bay water, I wanted to use a bluish color, similar to its appearance. I decided to experiment with a new pigment, which promised a different look: a fine grade Moroccan iron glimmer. By itself, the pigment had almost no opacity. Used on a light ground, its effect was insignificant. However, when mixed with a darker, more opaque color, or

painted over a dark background, it produced a glimmering surface having a soft industrial look. For the Santa Monica Bay body of water, I mixed the iron glimmer with ultramarine and obtained a delicate blue with a soft glimmer. The two bodies of water were separated by a perfectly straight narrow white strip, like a road marking. Some of the place names on the coasts were cropped by the outlines of the piece's shape, or even emerged as from underneath the other color band. The text on the Romanian side preserved the original hand-made lettering quality, in contrast with the modern, neutral look of the letters on the Santa Monica side. *Coast Lines* was installed at an angle, approximately corresponding to the inclination of the coast to the north on the map. The piece was at once hybrid and cohesive. This dual status was something I wanted to achieve as it possibly relates to my own personality and experience. In addition, Southern California's appeal to me resides also in the way it has constructed this hybrid identity, expressed even in place names, some of Spanish and others of English origin, sometimes mixed in one name, like "Redondo Beach" or "Mission Viejo".

In terms of the questions in the statement of problem, I feel that *Coast Lines* successfully answered all three. The details mentioned above relate to the first two questions. The third question applies to the show as a whole, from which *Coast Lines* was part, and would be discussed further. However, there is a detail in the second question which applies to all the works in the show. It relates to "immediate or everyday life elements". It seems that in my own work, distance and absence, as opposed to immediacy and everyday things, work as catalysts in creating a physical and conceptual presence in the work of art. I did not feel the need to refer to anything immediate in any individual

piece. The reason may be that I need a certain familiarity which distance often gives, by an apparent paradox. Instead, immediate elements were important in the physical process—visual and tactile—of making and installing the artwork: the impact and interaction of shapes and colors, individual pieces and the space. It is the absence and distance that were brought into immediacy by the pieces in the show.

The three freestanding pieces were critical elements in the show, and answered successfully the questions in the statement of problem. In relation to the first question, their most important contribution was the large scale sculptural dimension, achieved by their status as objects and the painting on both sides of the board. The second question was addressed by the inclusion of several elements relating to both distant and everyday life elements. The impact of the pieces as nodal points of the installation addressed the third question. The following description of the pieces discusses these issues more in detail.

West Coast and *East Coast* derived from the same idea developed in *Coast Lines*. *West Coast*'s contour was based on the Santa Monica Bay coast line and was actually the shape of the body of water. More earthbound, *East Coast* was also based on a coast shape, but was made up of the body of land instead, since I wanted to include all the details on the old topographical map: Ottoman and Romanian place names, mounds (most likely ancient tombs), fields, creeks, beaches. Both pieces had one irregular side, which described the coast line, played against the perfectly straight line of the other side of the board from which they were cut out. This way, each had a dominant direction in space: *West Coast* was inclined almost 45 degrees from the vertical "north", while *East*

Coast stood perfectly vertical, just like the north-south orientation of the Black Sea coast in that place on the map. The third piece, *10 from 405 to Vermont*, described, as its title suggests, a portion of the Santa Monica Freeway (10) between 405 Freeway and Vermont Boulevard in Los Angeles. This was one of the roads I traveled most often while in the Los Angeles area. It was said to have the highest traffic in the world. All three pieces were standing on end, secured with museum wax to the concrete floor, and had the top secured to the ceiling with clear plastic wire, which was almost invisible. Since the three pieces were based on actual shapes, they implicitly had a front view and a reverse.

West Coast was made from a twelve-foot-long board. The coast line side followed the map contour carefully, including the piers and the channel entrance and breakwater, cut out, as in *Coast Lines*, as if the negative space shaped the piece. The hardest cut was the breakwater, which actually had no connection to the exterior, as had the piers. The choice of colors related to my experience of the place. On the front, I decided to use a blue, suggesting the color of the ocean, mixed of ultramarine, viridian, and iron glimmer. The reverse was somewhat related to the blue, as in a sad, minor mode. I remembered the shocking difference on the bus route going straight east from the coast area, which turned into a depressing ride along Slauson Avenue through neighborhoods where poverty and crime were the rule. I was told that some children living in those areas never even saw the ocean. I simply mixed black and white to obtain a cool gray (ironically always good as a background to enhance bright colors) and used a black line for the interminable Slauson Avenue, a kind of Wilshire of the poor. I did not mean to make a political statement, but to include another element of reality one cannot ignore (as an ironic contrast, the bus

service that ran along the largely affluent coast area was called “Blue Line”). Streets and place names were painted on white on both sides. On the background under the dominant Los Angeles maps on both sides, I traced in pencil a much enlarged portion of an old topographical map including a small area just north of the Danube in Romania. I knew details about the area only from family stories, and the place names that have a familiar ring to me exist only in the memory of a few and in such rare maps. It was even more fascinating that I found the map in the United States, thousands of miles away from where it was made. *West Coast* included a couple of “windows” on the front and reverse side respectively. They were two images painted in acrylic, based on black-and-white photographs I took in Romania in a place to which my family is connected: an almost abandoned village and ruined monastery (the place was included in several of my works). The image on the front was easily recognizable as a landscape, while the one on the reverse was a much enlarged detail of a fresco whose surface was damaged, not unlike the walls in the Slauson area. A one-inch narrow painted strip ran along the straight side on the front, like a exposure test gray scale from dark to light, divided into feet and numbered from one to twelve. I painted similar scales on the side of *East Coast*. On other pieces in the show, such as *Split Rules* and *Orange Split Landscape*, I included a line spanning the length of the work divided in both inches and centimeters. The relativity of the units of measure regarded as accurate, and the technical impossibility to convert the two systems into each other stands for me as a paradigm for incongruity and the impossibility of translation.

East Coast was in a way the earth counterpart of the water in the blue, wing-like *West Coast*. As such, I chose a warm yellow ochre for the front side, suggestive of the color of the coast area it features. On the reverse side, I wanted to suggest a descent into earth with the potential archaeology of the unexplored tumuli. I chose a dark umber from Cyprus, unto which I traced in pencil, visible only from up close, a portion of the map of Cyprus. I thought about its share of plundering and destruction, not unlike Romania. I also painted in contrasting white a glossary of German geographic nouns and their Romanian equivalent, based on the one on a German military map from World War II. The cold list seemed to act like a measurement system as it descended along a straight vertical direction, a sobering reminder of another reality. In allusion to *West Coast*—or the images painted on *East Coast* were much enlarged details of photographs taken in Los Angeles traffic. The overall shape of *East Coast* was heavy, more like a Caryatid, as opposed to the bird-like elongated, dynamic shape of *West Coast*.

Like a distorted armature, *10 from 405 to Vermont* was a more simple counterpoint to the two *Coast* pieces. Its front was painted in pure iron glimmer, a suggestion of the freeway surface, and was overlaid with a multitude of place names along another east-west road in Romania, painted in white. Running vertically like rain drops, it may suggest, though unintendedly, incoming cars on the packed freeway. In contrast to the industrial-looking front, the reverse side was painted with a warm Cyprus umber overlaid by a very much enlarged old map of Craiova—the city from where my family comes—which acts more like an abstract decoration in white. The installation included smaller pieces that related to my previous work. *Twins and Fragments* were

based on jigsaw puzzle shapes. The *Orange, Black, and Green Split Landscapes* were corner pieces evolved from distorted, elongated pieces that preceded *Split Rules*. They also dealt with incongruity, continuity and break at the same time. *Yellow Sign Landscape* was a rather arbitrarily elongated distortion of a puzzle piece combined with a yellow diamond road sign. Together with the large pieces whose shapes were based on map contours, they were part of an installation in which pieces seemed to point and direct toward each other, in a movement combining circular, linear, and diagonal suggestions. The freestanding pieces were oriented at different angles allowing for a best perception and spatial presence, also directing the vision toward other pieces in the show. The lighting, best seen at night, enhanced the presence of the pieces, especially the large, freestanding ones, where the cast shadows became discreet, yet important parts of the installation.

CHAPTER III

CONCLUSION

The installation at DVAC, subtitled *Distant Proximity*, was an important step for me as an artist. It allowed me to push my ideas further and explore new formats and approaches. It achieved a closer relationship between form and content, between ideas and objects. The sculptural dimension of the freestanding pieces was very important for the project both as solution and as outcome. The formal and conceptual choices in individual pieces, as well as in the installation as a whole were beneficial challenges that were addressed in detail. The enjoyable learning experience of making and displaying the artwork for the show is going to be an important point in my career.